

Reflection —January 6, 2019
By Sr. Michele Bisbey, CDP

Good morning and happy epiphany.

As I came in this morning, I overheard some folks puzzling over the cover of your worship aid.

Some celebrate this day as Women's Christmas, which originated as a day when those who typically carry the domestic responsibilities all year, take Epiphany as an occasion to celebrate together at the end of the holidays.

And that is exactly what some of the Sisters and Associates have been doing this weekend celebrating with friends and also spending time in reflection before diving into the responsibilities of the new year.

It has been a blessed time, truly a gift of renewal in the midst of so much activity.

Growing up I remember this feast as "little Christmas."

And when I was in the 4th grade, I won a prize for a poem that I wrote about little Christmas.

I'm not convinced that it was 100% original, however, over the years, I have made it my own as I find that single stanza is often replayed in my thoughts—particularly in this season and most especially, on this feast.

The verse goes like this: "The magi came and laid their gifts before the Child that day; but greater than the gifts they gave were those they took away."

According to the scriptural text, the gifts the magi laid before the Child were gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

(Admittedly, unconventional choices for a baby shower)



Because there were three gifts tradition has assumed that there were three gift givers—even though the Scriptures don't specify a number.

Perhaps, a few combined their resources to provide such extravagant gifts and if so, then there could have been more than three gift bearing night time visitors.

And we've assumed that they were men because in the tradition they're referred to as kings or as wise men.

But in the gospel of Matthew they are magi, that is— magicians, sorcerers, astronomers who traveled from the Orient the mysterious East from countries sometimes identified as Persia, Arabia, and Ethiopia.

And there's even a Zoroastrian tradition that claims women were numbered among the ancient Eastern star gazers. (such as the women on the cover of the worship aid—bearing useful gifts).

So, the text raises a great many questions—and allows for imaginative speculation.

The one thing that there is agreement about both in the text and in the tradition is the fact those dreamers (of whatever number or gender) were lured from their comfort zones to follow a star.

I wonder about those travelers and the circumstances that compelled them to undertake such a journey.

Likely, they risked their fortunes and perhaps their reputations to travel so far, to bring their precious gifts.

It wasn't an easy trip. Their purpose was nearly thwarted and their lives threatened by a paranoid ruler. They set out to see royalty and found themselves kneeling before a baby born of indigent parents in an out of the way place.

What stirred in their hearts to entice them to risk so much? What deep yearning led them to venture so far?

What sign in the sky, would give you or me the courage to forsake the comfortable?

What sign in the sky, would make you or me relinquish the familiar?

What sign in the sky would embolden you or me to set off into parts unknown?

And then it strikes me that the magi were simply living their lives to their natural conclusions.

Their life's work was studying the stars, sitting in night time quiet, observing, taking notes on parchment and sharing their insights with other scholars.

But when they saw that star all they could do, if they were to be true to whom they were called to be, was to follow its direction, whatever the cost, wherever it led.

Along the way, they saw things they never anticipated seeing; they encountered people, they never planned on meeting. And in the following they came face to face with the God of Providence, God with us, in a totally unexpected, unpredictable guise.

Perhaps, this is the way of it for all of us. As we use and develop the gifts that our Provident God has planted within us following our hopes, lured by our dreams, driven by our passions, as we become all we were made to be, we too, are led to places, and people and events far from our familiar comfort zones.

And perhaps we too, are surprised by grace as we come face to face with the God of Providence,

God with us, in totally unexpected, unpredictable guises.

And when that happens, it is not possible to return home the same way we came. It is not possible to meet the Child and remain unchanged.

Because as the light of the Epiphany star sears our souls it also casts its beam across and beyond the familiar horizon luring us to imagine a new vision of possibilities drawing us out of our ordinariness and flooding us with grace to embrace the task of creating a space where we cherish our intercultural and international ties; strive for right relationships with all; live and promote every form of nonviolence; courageously risk being marginalized; generously share even in the midst of scarcity.

Difficult? Yes.

Impossible? No!

Not if we let the Light of that vulnerable Babe draw us beyond the narrow darkness of our too small worlds.

It is not impossible, If we, like those depicted on the last page of our worship aid, go to the periphery, if we join the throng on the margins, If we are faithful to our every day calls If we are ever ready to travel towards new and wider horizons like the magi sojourners.

It is not impossible if we trust our provident God who is with us in our daily realities always luring us deeper and forward.

The respite of our women's Christmas celebration may soon come to an end and we will once again take up our daily responsibilities, Let do so together with renewed energy knowing that we, like the magi have laid our gifts before the Child today. Now we will return home by another way Bearing the even greater gift of making God's Providence visible.

(With extensive borrowing of ideas and phrasing from Barbara Quinn, RSCJ.

<http://www.catholicwomenpreach.org/preaching/01062019>. The description of Women's Christmas is from Jan Richardson).